

JUST2CE

A Just Transition to Circular Economy



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CHAPTER 18

The relevance of gender justice: How gender is shaping sustainability and circular economy

Chapter 18. The relevance of gender justice: How gender is shaping sustainability and circular economy

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Abstract

Through approaches such as Feminist Ecological Economics (FEE) and Gendered Innovation (GI), and specific examples based in concrete case studies we will try to address: 1) What gender and gender justice means and 2) how gender is shaping sustainability and Circular Economy (CE), and what are the implications of this to dimensions of justice. The two mentioned approaches allow a broader definition on gender justice: FEE through a deep and intersectional discussion of economic valuation mechanisms and GI through gender considerations throughout the research process. To illuminate these approaches to circularity and justice in terms of gender we will introduce two case studies based on non-corporate, i.e. community-oriented CE practices developing what we call a value transformative approach to CE (a community composting in New York City and reuse communities in Maine). Finally, since these two examples and others that we found in the literature review are contextualized in GN we add a final subsection discussing the importance of addressing CE experiences from the GS with a decolonial perspective.

Keywords: Gender justice, circular economy, sustainability, gendered innovation, feminist ecological economics

Our aim in this chapter is to investigate the meaning of "gender justice" for the CE and to offer conceptual tools for expanding our understanding of gender in the context of CE.

18.1 Introduction

The basic question we want to tackle in this chapter is: how is gender shaping the CE and what are the implications of this to dimensions of justice?

To address this issue we need to clarify first what gender and gender justice means. First, gender is not a synonym for the female sex, but a social construct which determines norms and expectations about people's position in society, and about their behavior. Social norms shape social performance, including the division of labour in

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society, and economic valuation (Martínez Álvarez and Barca, 2023). Moreover, women are an internally differentiated category, intersected by class, race/ethnicity, ability and other differentiations.

Gender justice is understood as an approach aimed at tackling the discrimination of women as they intersect with various different lived experiences. This involves unpacking the root causes of gender discrimination and of unequal valuation, as well as an understanding of how other intersecting categories are shaping the CE and women's position in it. Consequently, gender justice does not coincide with gender equality and can only be achieved by taking all of these factors into account.

In Feminist political economy, gender is understood as a function of the social division of labour – that is, of the division between so-called productive and so-called reproductive or care work. This division determines the value attributed to each type of work, and their association with specific social groups. In other words, in most societies a patriarchal value system predominates, which consists in devaluing reproductive work and assigning it to women. This means that the social division of labour comes with not only gender differentiation, but also with a broader set of social hierarchies. Devalued reproductive work is typically associated with women who find themselves in the lower position in these other social hierarchies.

This perspective is crucial when looking at dimensions of justice, given that the most common approach in economic policies and planning is that of overlapping gender with women, where 'women' are understood as a pre-determined and homogeneous category. And so, the findings from one group of women can get generalised to all women, and have detrimental impacts for gender justice. Thus, the category of gender requires careful consideration in research and practice.

Approaches like gendered innovation focus on including gender considerations throughout the research process, from the formulation of the research questions, methodologies, data collection, interpretation, and application. According to scholars, projects that focus on gendered innovation have a number of advantages for disciplines "by ensuring excellence and quality in outcomes and enhancing sustainability and adds value to society by making research more responsive to social needs."

Although gendered innovation approaches would also be championed for how it can lead to technological and scientific breakthroughs (Schiebinger, 2021), our focus on this chapter is on how gendered innovation, as a framework for embedding gender throughout the research process, could be a useful tool if it was coupled with a justice approach.

We start with a broad review of the larger sustainability agenda and how gender has been framed within this discourse, to then unpack gender in the CE. We illustrate the multiple ways in which gender can be approached, and our focus on feminist ecological economics as the framework for incorporating dimensions of justice. We then present some examples of CE experiences that can shed light into what a gender justice approach to CE would look like in practice.

18.2 Literature review

Our literature review search strategy was based on three dimensions. First, we drew on a previous literature review for the gender justice report elaborated for the JUST2CE project. This literature review was based in a search of

Feminist Ecological Economics (FEE) documents, but also in articles who related CE with gender and care in their title, abstract or keywords. We searched for these concepts in relevant databases such as WOS or SCOPUS but also in specific journals, such as Feminist Ecological Economics or Ecological Economics Journal. Second, we also wanted to broaden the scope of this chapter by connecting the gender dimension in CE with the broader notion of sustainability. Our notion of sustainability was informed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), so we searched for studies that looked at literature on the gender dimension within the SDGs. We then complemented this with the notion of gendered innovation, as a framework for embedding gender throughout the research process.

18.3 Sustainability and gender

The agenda for sustainability and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become a global priority, influencing policy and planning for decades (Connelly, 2007). The United Nations defines sustainability as a multidimensional and integrated approach to addressing environmental challenges alongside socioeconomic development. Due to their all-encompassing nature, the SDGs and broader sustainability agenda have been a concern across countries, industries, and fields, including the more traditional environmentalist and development disciplines as well as engineering, physics, data science, and more (Leavesley et al., 2022).

The SDGs and broader agenda for sustainable development have also been at the centre of more recent theoretical approaches to sustainability, including the circular economy (Schroeder et al., 2019; Suárez-Eiroa et al., 2021). For some, the circular economy has emerged as the most important concept for achieving the SDGs, as it is viewed as providing market-based, technological, and political solutions (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2020). In addition, it seeks to be fit for transforming both public policy and offer individualised solutions to local sustainability challenges. Overall, a synergistic relationship appears to exist between sustainability and the circular economy.

Although the SDGs and sustainability agenda seek to examine multiple dimensions, there are certain transversal tenets that can be found throughout the targets and indicators. Issues such as a focus on impoverished populations, the focus on the GS/developing nations, and inclusive practices are reiterated frequently throughout the SDGs. Amongst there, gender is a cross-cutting theme. Not only is SDG 5 wholly concerned with achieving "gender equality and empower all women and girls" (UN, 2015 14), but the SDGs' discourse places a strong emphasis on gender as a cross-cutting theme (Leal Filho et al., 2022). The global goal for SDG 5 is to achieve gender equality, and to empower women and girls by eliminating gender disparities, discrimination, and violence against women (UN, 2015).

The SDG5 focuses on reducing and eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls (5.1, 5.2, 5.3), recognising and valuing unpaid care and domestic work (5.4), and ensuring that women have equal economic opportunities and access to healthcare (5.5, 5.A, 5.6). These objectives illustrate a variety of intervention areas. The remaining targets (5.B and 5.c) place a greater emphasis on empowering women and girls through the improvement of digital technologies and the promotion of sensible policies. In addition to these, there are 45 gender-related SDG targets and 54 indicators (Filho et al., 2022).

While the inclusion of a gender element in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a significant step towards addressing gender inequalities, it is important to note that the emphasis is frequently placed primarily on women's empowerment and leadership, as it is assumed that this will have positive effects on individuals, communities, and

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nations (Odera & Mulusa, 2020). Less attention is paid to how the SDGs could resolve the structural factors that have historically perpetuated gender disparities (Esquivel 2016). Indicators for measuring the impact of SDG 5 include "number of women in political positions" and "number of women in managerial positions," among others. It also encompasses "mobile telephone ownership" and "female lands rights and ownership." These indicators indicate a strong emphasis on attaining gender equality by ensuring that women have the same opportunities as men to attain economic stability and power positions (Struckmann, 2018).

By focusing primarily on women's empowerment and leadership, the gender component of the SDGs risks regarding gender as an individual issue as opposed to a structural issue that seeks to challenge patriarchal norms and oppressive systems (ibid). Importantly, it suggests that the emphasis should be placed on transforming women rather than systems. Much of this represents a liberal/neoliberal approach to gender that has been extensively critiqued by feminist scholars.

Moreover, another issue lies within the notion of gender. Scholars have argued that the SDGs run the risk of homogenizing women and girls' experiences. Some have called for the need to disaggregate data to make it more representative of the diversity of women's experiences across the world (Devakumar et al., 2023).

A broader approach to sustainability and gender: Feminist Ecological Economics

Feminist Ecological Economics (FEE), has systematically linked the ecological crisis with gender inequalities, specifically the devaluation of reproduction (i.e. not taking into account reproduction as an essential element to reproduce societies and their environment, and for market production.). From this perspective, the concept of sustainability is discussed with a critical approach that questions the neoliberal framework of sustainable development, which promotes GDP growth as the only way to achieve prosperity, despite the fact that this ignores the foundations of every eco-system. (Waring, 1988; Gottschlich and Bellina, 2017; O'Hara [1999] 2010; Berik 2018).

In fact, by adopting the lens of reproduction and care work, the relationship between human beings and the biosphere appears substantially different than when focusing on production or consumption. When the production of / care for people is connected with the production of / care for healthy environments, the positive, i.e. nurturing, restoring, repairing and life-sustaining potential of housework becomes evident.

This positive link raises the question of bringing care work center-stage in sustainability, and thus in CE practices and policies. It also raises the question of how to organize environmental care in gender-equal terms so that it does not fall exclusively upon women's shoulders (Paño Yanez, 2021). According to Gottschlich and Bellina (2017), the mainstream sustainability discourse has failed to address the structural significance of (unpaid) care work, not only for the economic system but also for the reproduction of society as a whole. They argue that sustainability needs to be based on a "critical-emancipatory" conceptualization, driven by environmental justice and feminist political economy.

Since the late 1990s feminist ecological economists noted how Quality of Life indicators also continued to ignore social and environmental sustainability (O'Hara, 1999; Gottschlich and Bellina, 2017; Berik, 2018; Streimikiene 2015). From a FEE perspective, the dominant discourse on sustainability neglects the crisis of social reproduction, as well as the "interconnectedness" between the spheres of production and reproduction. In other words, human,

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social and ecological reproduction is necessary to develop the productive dimension intended as formal employment in the market. For this reason, some authors find it pertinent to bring up the concept of “sustainability of life”. This concept allows us to overcome the boundary between the monetized economy and the devalued care work and the ecosystem functions (Dengler and Lang, 2022: 7) and to consider social and biological reproduction as key elements of sustainability. “Sustainability of life” is related to notions such as good life or well-being, hence also to the Buen Vivir conception so important in Latin America. The demand for FEE scholars is to find alternative languages of valuation that put the sustainability of life in a prominent position putting “life in the centre” (“la vida en el centro”) of valuation mechanisms. One of these alternative propositions is to “(re)integrate” production in its social and ecological context, encompassing all reproductive functions and conceiving all these processes as unity (Biesecker and Hofmeister, 2010). Likewise, for FEE sustainability must focus on closing the loop between production and reproduction. The key question then becomes how to rethink and reorganize the CE in a way that it incorporates care work and reproduction.

18.4 Circularity and gender Justice

This section starts by taking into account a recent study from the Industrial Development Organization of the United Nations (UNIDO 2022), which shows that women are mostly associated with “low-value added, informal and end-of-pipe activities of the circular economy”, while they form a very minority group in the “higher value-added circular activities involving greater use of advanced technologies”.

Our intention is to take this previous finding as an entry point into a broader, intersectional discussion of economic valuation mechanisms, based on a broader definition of gender justice, which aims at questioning and ultimately reframing both gender and value inequalities.

To delve into this discussion, as in the section on sustainability, we took into account the literature based on Feminist Ecological Economics. Central to this field of studies is the premise that production, intended as formal employment in the market, is only one small part of the economy, which would collapse without human, social and ecological reproduction, which largely take place outside the market, and mostly via unpaid work. This idea is represented by the diverse economies iceberg (**Figure 18.1**), which comes from feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson Graham; The sea level, discriminating between the two parts of the iceberg, represents valuation in GDP accounting. This figure shows how GDP growth is (literally) based on the devaluation of all the work that is necessary to reproduce not only societies but also their environments.

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transformation based in gender justice principles. One of the main propositions is to change the focus from value creation and reorienting CE around the ethics of care. Not considering domestic activities and care work inside households as productive or value-making leads to inadequate policies.

18.5 A value-transformative approach to CE: Reuse communities and community composting

To illuminate our approach to circularity and justice in terms of gender we will introduce two case studies based on non-corporate, i.e. community-oriented CE practices – specifically, reuse and composting – developing what we call a value-transformative approach to CE. Community-oriented CEs are described as the most fertile terrain for value transformation; however, they are also shaped by the currently dominant gender/value constructs.

Investigating community composting in New York City, Morrow and Davies (2021) highlight how the main values in reuse and repair communities are related to enhancing social cohesion as well as individual and environmental wellbeing, but most of all it is the importance of the social, material and affective relations related to care work that is done in these contexts. The authors trace the lack of consideration for social values in CE discourse 'back to the emergence of political economy as a scientific approach'. Studies of the CE in the food waste sector, they argue, tend to concentrate on technical and managerial efficiency, while overlooking aspects such as the 'labour, health, equity, care, education, and participation' involved in composting programmes (ibid) – or else, the social reproduction basis of the CE iceberg. Adopting the non-capital centric perspective of Gibson-Graham's 'diverse economies' approach, they develop an alternative framework of sustainability, based on 'a radical rethinking of economy and waste' to look beyond efficiency, privileging 'the affective, material, and ethical doing of care'. The authors define community composting as an activity based in "the notion that organic food waste is processed as closed to the sources where it was generated to capture the benefits of both the process and the finished product for the community".

In Morrow and Davies case study, transforming waste into commons facilitates collective forms of care, which contrasts market-oriented CE approaches based on revalorizing waste as commodity – i.e. as individual profit-maximization. The authors criticize mainstream CE approaches for privileging economic productivity and efficiency or commodity production and exchange, and limitless growth. As they write: "Closing loops, without attending to social impacts, equity, justice, ethics, practices, or values, will not spur the just transitions that are so urgently needed" (539). This framing marginalizes and devalues care work (the paid and unpaid labours of caring for people and the planet). This study considers four community composting sites in New York City. All of them imply a significant involvement of municipal agencies: located on public property of the city of New York, these initiatives rely on not only unwaged but also waged labour, paid for by the municipality. Nevertheless, they are all run by non-profit organizations, and work with donated waste, which they give back to the community as gifted compost, co-produced and shared with the communities who are usually at the receiving end of toxic waste from the linear economy, but also of large municipal composting infrastructures (e.g. youth from communities of colour).

By processing food waste in the places where it is produced and collected, community composting allows to bypass the spatial injustice of centralized municipal composting facilities, which inevitably end up moving large

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quantities of waste into poorer communities of colour. Community composting is not only about closing material loops in urban metabolism, but also about countering environmental injustice, and 'circulating resources where they are most needed, according to the logics of care, social justice, and solidarity'. The authors argue that 'In direct contrast to the commercial and municipal kerb-side collection of organic waste and the mega-facility composting infrastructures which are exacerbating socio-environmental injustices, community composting ensures the value of end-of-life food remains within the territorial communities that create it.

However, following mainstream CE discourse, municipal assessments of composting tend to focus on economic efficiency rather than care and justice. As a consequence, turning waste into a common, rather than a commodity, makes community composting's contribution to sustainability largely invisible in GDP accounting. In short, this study describes New York City community composting as an example of the unvalued and invisible caring labour that sustains the CE iceberg, but also of already existing alternative, justice-oriented ways of practicing CE.

Drawing on theories of gendered social reproductive labor, Berry (2022) investigates reuse communities, predominantly formed by volunteer women. The author proposes framing CE as an effort at closing the loop between production and reproduction by expanding our understanding of CE towards including care work, specifically that which takes place outside the household, in community-based reuse organizations. Investigating, through ethnographic fieldwork, community thrift shops in rural Maine, the article highlights the labour of managing the daily overwhelming flow of used stuff, which the author defines as 'donation dumping', i.e. a practice that frees consumers of guilt, implicitly encouraging more consumption (thus keeping production going), and, in the process, depleting the labour of reuse volunteers.

From a feminist political economy perspective, donation dumping represents the valued production that grows unsustainably over the unvalued labour of reproduction, understood here as caring for the environment by taking care of discarded objects. Berry argues that, just as it happens with reproductive work carried out within the household, community-based reuse tends to be underacknowledged and devalued compared to other kinds of labour, because of its gendered dimension. Reuse is characterized as an invisible care work because it is unpaid work mostly done by women volunteers and does not generate market value. 'If the unpaid care work volunteers perform is not seen as labour – the author argues – and the negative effects of this work on laborers are not counted among the potential harms of a linear system of production-consumption-disposal, then policies designed to address such systems will fail'.

They call for 'a need to shift burdens onto producers' through 'extended producer responsibility programs', i.e. shifting our understanding of producers' responsibility from one centred on the environment, to one centred on both the environment and labour, including unpaid labour. Nevertheless, they conclude, 'Questions about the monetary value of this gendered, voluntary labour here elide the overarching problem: there is simply too much stuff'. Thus, the emphasis would be on setting limits to growth and production rather than economically valuing this gendered volunteer work, which, as observed in the analysis of the FEE or degrowth literature, can lead to the individualization of collective problems and the commodification of social and common practices and resources. Once again the focus is on reframing economic valuation mechanisms.

The invisibility of the GS and the implications for justice

As we mentioned at the beginning of this section, these two case studies are important because they show practices that develop a value-transformative approach to CE. But both are contextualized in countries of the GN. In our literature review, we have observed how a large part of the case studies focused on this approach are

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contextualized in Europe or the United States (Coghlan *et al*, 2022; McQueen *et al*, 2022; Berry 2022; van der Velden, 2021; Morrow and Davies, 2021), when there are numerous examples throughout the GS (especially in Latin America) of practices with this approach and generally located in alternative and transformative economies. As Pablo Paño Yañez (2021) argues, there are already some embedded CE practices in numerous regions in the South, based on better rates of re-utilization and repair, as well as lower consumption, which equals to decrease.

Paño Yañez (2021) points out that capitalism does not manifest itself with such expansion in the habits of these territories, while the continuity of other production, exchange and consumption systems also show other practices. Urban recycling, agroecology and permaculture initiatives would be specific examples that provide livelihood to many people through popular and social economy (2021:290). As Paño Yañez (2021) puts it, it seems important to highlight the connection of these practices with deeply rooted conceptions in territories of the GS such as the conception of *Buen Vivir* in Latin America (2021), also linked to central elements in CE such as the sustainability and specifically the concept of "sustainability of life". Both, the latter and *Buen Vivir* conception deviate from a rational, productivist logic and offer alternative approaches to social justice and aspiring to live through values of reciprocity, complementarity, and relationality (Jimenez *et al.*, 2022). For both, the main purpose is the satisfaction of direct human needs and the reproduction of life (a good life) in the widest sense. *Buen Vivir*, when grounded on the lived experiences of indigenous and marginalised peoples in the GS, can be understood as a *mobilising utopia* that embraces CE practices and justice (*ibid*).

A relevant example that Paño's article points out, which appears in the little literature focused on the GS and also in the numerous contents of gray literature, is that of waste pickers. For Paño, these are central agents linked to practices located in the orbit of CE, but which are made up of sectors of the population that are precarious and little recognized at the social and institutional level, and of course also at a salary level. These people usually work within the framework of an informal and feminized job. This article also points to the passage of waste collection for recycling at the hands of large companies as a process that led to a significant worsening of inequality in this context, eliminating a form of maintenance that was historically assumed in a decentralized manner by thousands of families that end up lacking this form of income.

The importance of waste pickers is also mentioned in an article by Gammage, Kabeer and van der Meulen Rodgers (2015) in which the question of agency is explored from the perspective of feminist economics. These authors point out the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers (GAWP) as an example of important initiatives in the GS "to raise consciousness about the role of waste pickers as important players in mitigating climate change and contributing to a sustainable development" (2015:15). GAWP also fights for promoting waste picker right to be included in urban policy development. One of the GAWP achievements has been to support claims-making by waste picker organizations and increase their influence over waste policy management, recycling programs and pricing. In fact, the Packaging Act in Uruguay in 2007 was influenced by the organizing strategies of waste pickers supported by different NGOs such as WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing) and GAWP (2015).

Along the same lines, but focused specifically on the implementation of the circular economy, is the article by Valencia *et al* (2023). This article highlights the importance of these actors (specifically female waste picker leaders from Ecuador and Colombia) and their demands for dignity, care-work counting and environmental justice when proposing a guide policy and practice for a just transition to a circular economy

Overall, it is surprising that there is a substantial lack of literature that frames gender dynamics in CE in the GS. The lack of literature, however, should not be confused with lack of real-world examples. It just demonstrates the coloniality of knowledge that is embedded in CE research (Pansera *et al.*, 2021). We argue that there is a need to

focus on these experiences if we are to develop a gender justice approach to CE, where the experiences of women in the GS are acknowledged.

18.6 Conclusions

This chapter has concentrated on dissecting how gender has been positioned within CE research and the implications of this framing for justice dimensions. Our starting point is that, rather than applying an uncritical gender lens to CE, these lenses must be framed from a gender justice perspective. Our position has been to adopt FEE given the important aspect of social division of labour which is crucial for looking at CE practices. We acknowledge that other gender approaches that are grounded in justice would also provide interesting insights into this area.

The literature review conducted for this chapter has revealed two important aspects. First, gender is not at the core of CE research, which risks invisibilising women experiences's but also, devaluing the importance of social and reproductive work. Importantly, the way in which gender is embedded in sustainability and the SDGs should serve as a cautionary tale for what occurs if our approach to gender is not framed by a logic of justice, but rather by neoliberal values that emphasise empowerment while ignoring structural inequalities.

The second aspect is that the majority of literature that examines the gender dimension of CE focuses on Northern experiences. As previously mentioned, it is essential that this disparity be viewed as a broader problem with the production of knowledge, in which the GS is largely ignored or viewed with a precarious mindset. It is not the case that there are no examples of feminist CE initiatives; however, more research is required to investigate these initiatives and determine what the GN can learn from them.

Both these aspects suggest a missed opportunity for understanding just transitions to CE. They need to be addressed if we are to truly have a gender justice lens to CE. In order to do this, the following are some recommendations:

Explicitly embrace a gender justice perspective. Otherwise, you could adopt a gender perspective that homogenises women's experiences and emphasises individual rather than structural dimensions.

Adopt a gendered innovation strategy that integrates a gender perspective throughout the research process. To avoid neoliberal framings, it is essential, however, that this be viewed through a gender justice lens.

Embrace a decolonial perspective when producing knowledge. CE experiences of women exist in the GS. It is imperative to explore what it means that these experiences are not informing our way of understanding CE

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